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C O N F I D E N T I A L THE HAGUE 000048

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [NATO](#) [AF](#) [NL](#)

SUBJECT: NETHERLANDS/AFGHANISTAN: DUTCH SUFFER FRIENDLY
FIRE CASUALTIES

Classified By: Ambassador Roland Arnall, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The GONL suffered its first casualties due to friendly fire January 12 when two Dutch and two Afghan soldiers were apparently killed by Dutch troops during a firefight in the southwestern part of the Afghan province of Uruzgan. Two investigations have been launched to determine the cause of the incident. GONL officials were shocked by the incident, but have reiterated the Dutch commitment to their ISAF mission in Uruzgan. Widespread press coverage thus far has been relatively restrained. End summary.

Friendly Fire Casualties

¶2. (SBU) Dutch CHOD Gen. Berlijn announced during a Jan. 13 press conference that two Dutch and two Afghan soldiers were killed "most likely" by Dutch friendly fire on Jan. 12 during a firefight with Opposing Militant Forces near Deh Rawod in the southern Afghan province of Uruzgan. The two Dutch fatalities bring the total number of Dutch soldiers killed in Afghanistan to 14. Dutch forces were taking part in a reconnaissance operation in the area to determine whether it was safe for refugees to return to their homes. Gen. Berlijn said the fatalities occurred as a result of "darkness, bad weather circumstances, and a complex situation on the ground." While details are still coming to light, it appears the two Afghan fatalities were not wearing "any recognizable uniform" at the time they approached their Dutch counterparts. Two investigations conducted by the Dutch MOD and the military police Marechaussee via a request by the public prosecutor's office will examine the incident further.

¶3. (SBU) Gen. Berlijn emphasized that despite the "heavy setback," the Dutch should not "ignore the progress" being made in Uruzgan. He stressed that the Dutch will continue to work toward the creation of a safe environment for the Afghan people, while the Taliban should "understand that they cannot continue to terrorize the population unmolested." In response to the fatalities, Prime Minister Balkenende and Defense Minister van Middelkoop extended condolences January 13 to the victims' families, and expressed appreciation for those that sacrificed all for a mission that is "difficult and full of risks."

MOD Response

¶4. (C) Defense Minister van Middelkoop appreciated the condolences Amb. Arnall expressed during a January 15 meeting. Van Middelkoop said he and Afghan Defense Minister Wardak had made a point to contact each other regarding the incident, and stressed the necessity of "investigating in-depth" what happened in Deh Rawod. He described a "shocked Parliament" returning from winter break, and anticipated a great number of questions. But van Middelkoop saw a "mature response" from the Dutch public thus far, albeit with a few exceptions. Prior to the incident, Van Middelkoop spent New Year's in Uruzgan with Dutch troops, and described a "positive and optimistic mood" bolstering the feeling that the Dutch are "on the right track." He suggested that this confidence played in part to the Dutch decision to clear the area around Deh Rawod of Taliban to facilitate the return of refugees.

¶5. (C) Amb. Arnall delivered a letter from Secretary Gates to van Middelkoop congratulating the Dutch decision to extend in Uruzgan, and stressed the importance of looking now for an able Allied replacement to lead ISAF efforts in Uruzgan once the Dutch withdraw Task Force Uruzgan in December 2010. Amb. Arnall noted that the Dutch have the "morale authority" to push other Allies to do more, and should do so now instead of waiting until later. Van Middelkoop agreed, noting that the Dutch are in part responsible for finding their replacement, but he personally did not have any answers regarding a successor. He also made the point that while the Dutch Task Force Uruzgan would withdraw in 2010, the Dutch would remain in Afghanistan in a yet to be defined role.

Press Reaction

¶6. (SBU) The incident has garnered widespread coverage in the Dutch media. Many Dutch newspapers (NRC Handelsblad, Algemeen Dagblad, Trouw) editorialize that casualties resulting from friendly fire are inevitable, while the center-left newspaper Volkskrant categorized the incident as the "worst tragedy" of the Dutch mission thus far and center-right newspaper Telegraaf described it as a "nightmare." All newspapers report surprise by Dutch forces that the Taliban was "stronger than expected" in Deh Rawod. Newspapers Trouw and Telegraaf also carried articles suggesting that a shortage of communications equipment may have contributed to the incident as the victims were unable to radio their colleagues. Several dailies also pushed for the need to develop a comprehensive and coherent strategy among ISAF partners.

Comment

¶7. (C) Of the 14 Dutch casualties in Afghanistan, these friendly fire fatalities have received by far the most attention. We expect a number of tough questions by parliament, which returned from winter break the day after the incident occurred. The public and press reaction has been balanced, with many reserving comment until after the investigations into the incident have taken place. Some opposition parties may attempt to use the fatalities to bolster the case that reconstruction is not possible in what they argue is primarily a combat mission. But these latest casualties should not affect the Dutch commitment in Uruzgan.

Arnall